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# Women who butcher: gender bias, knowledge politics, and solidarity in meat processing systems

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Vassar College

# Women Who Butcher: Gender Bias, Knowledge Politics, and Solidarity in Meat Processing Systems

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of  
Arts in Sociology

by

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Photo by Interviewee Anna

# **Women Who Butcher: Gender Bias, Knowledge Politics, and Solidarity in Meat Processing Systems**

This thesis analyzes the experiences of women in the United States who work with meat, particularly butchers. The data for this project comes primarily from semistructured interviews conducted in the Fall of 2017 with seven women who butcher professionally. The research identifies how the acquisition of knowledge and recognition of said knowledge for women in the industry is impeded by gender bias and masculine domination in meat processing systems. The thesis also conveys how these women counteract such bias through creating communal knowledge bases and educating their communities about healthy and just food systems. There is also an analysis of how more effort needs to be placed upon valuing the work and rights of women of color and women from low income communities, who are more likely to be working in industrial facilities than small scale butcheries. Thus, increased solidarity among women who work with meat can create a strong movement towards building a more just and equitable food system.

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## Introduction

### Why “Women Who Butcher?”

Imagine a butcher. Very likely, your first image was that of a man in a bloody apron. Yet women participate in this field as well, and it is a mark of the strength of prescribed gender expectations that their faces are not first to be imagined. Additionally, “lady butchers are a minority in the butcher industry — 24.6% of butchers are women, according to a 2010 analysis by the National Women’s Law Center, a nonprofit that advocates for women’s rights. Butchers and meat cutters are considered ‘nontraditional occupations’ for women, alongside other male-dominated jobs like police, lawyers, engineers and firefighter, according to the center” (Orlov 2017). This thesis serves to share the experiences of women who butcher, and to situate them and their experiences within an unjust food system and structures of gender oppression. Additionally, this will provide a space to visualize the ways these women are resisting gender roles and building community, as well as educating the public about the importance of the work they do.

When this project first began, my initial database searches of “women butchers” led to many articles about the brutal murders of women around the world. In conversations with acquaintances about the focus of my project, this sentiment has been echoed. I now make to sure to quickly remind people that butchers are people who work with meat, even if the identifier of women precedes that word. What does it say that when one adds the word “women” in front of a well known and understood profession, listeners jump to conclusions of violence and gendered assault? Herbert Sussman argues that “manliness is an unmarked category, an area that is seemingly so self-evident in its meaning that we seldom think about it” (2012:1). Men are in many instances the neutral state, hidden because they are the “norm.” This is evidenced by the

fact that I could not write this project without regularly identifying my participants as women butchers, or women who butcher, or women who work with meat.

If I wrote a project simply about “butchers,” most of my readers would assume a male population. That seemingly gender neutral term is not coded as gender neutral, but rather as masculine. One of my interviewees is a very small person, and when she shares her interest in butchery, she is met with shock and surprise. Her work challenges expectations defined by the dominant norms of gender relations. In this paper, I will be engaging with Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity, which is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (2001:39).

This project serves to provide a space for women who work in the business to share their stories and experiences, and to challenge the notion that butchers are only men. Halberstam would likely categorize their work and identity as a form of “female masculinity” which can sometimes “codify a unique form of social rebellion” (1998:9). Their work plays a role in challenging detractive gender roles and norms, which comes from “the main axis of power in the contemporary European/American gender order, the overall subordination of women and dominance of men—the structure Women’s Liberation named ‘patriarchy.’ This general structure exists despite many local reversals” (Connell 2001:36). Women in butchery is a local reversal, and though structural forces are too strong for some women’s employment to shatter the gendered access to trade work, it is absolutely a start, and visibility is a key component of this work, which this thesis will in part provide.

I have a background in gender studies and food systems studies, which sparked my interest in this topic. My initial wonderings were about if the women working professionally in

such a traditionally male dominated industry see their work as an act of resistance, or simply the profession they have chosen? What stories and experiences would they want to share? Would their experiences echo the women of the restaurant industry who have come forward in the #metoo movement? This project allowed me to have conversations with the women who work with meat, and for them to share some parts of stories of their employment experiences. Not all of my starting questions were answered, and my interview format opened my mind to many experiences and values I had not entered the project knowing about.

### • Literature Review •

A quick Google search will reveal that there is a plethora of popular media related to women butchers, especially in the last few years (Spaeth 2017, Krishna 2017, Orlov 2017, Guest 2016, Wragg 2017, Inge 2014, Watts 2013). The general public has some growing interest in seeing women working in this field. However, there is next to nothing when it comes to academic scholarship on women who professionally butcher. Magazine and youtube videos are great resources for learning from these women about meat cuts, how they adapt their work to fit their own interests, and more, but they rarely situate the butchers within larger systems and institutions. This thesis aims to fill some of this gap.

Though there is little scholarship on women who butcher, there exists a large amount of literature related to the connections between meat and masculinity, especially in a United States context. Twigg (1979, 1986) and Bourdieu (1984) were some of the earliest published academics focusing on sociological approaches to food and gender. The connection between red meat and virility is widespread historically, and this association “implies a relationship between meat-eating and certain attitudes and practices that are ascribed to dominant forms of masculinity in

the West” (Nath 2010). Abstaining from meat therefore can be interpreted as abstaining from the process of becoming a man (Twigg 1986). Bourdieu (1984) makes this connection as well; “[meat] the nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigor, blood, and health, is the dish for men” (192). This connection harks back to the division of labor in early societies, where labor was often divided by gender: men hunted, women gathered. That early division has continued to link men and meat for hundreds of thousands of years.

Neuhaus (1999) examined the messages presented in 1950s cookbooks about gender roles and meat. Many of the cookbooks present an argument that “men and meat *naturally* belonged together” (541) and that women should generally stick with dainty foods. The heartiness of meat provided bulk for men, allowing them to fully embrace a masculine physicality.

In Men’s Ministries, groups combatting the increasing femininity of Christian churches, meat consumption is a primary focus, linked directly with displays of masculinity. Events like “Men’s Meat and Greet” and “Meat n’ Mud Mantastic Mantime” provide spaces for meat consumption centered around men and manliness (Gelfer 2013).

Rothgerber (2013) and Calvert (2014) add to this body of literature, examining popular media like Men’s Health magazine and the television show *Man vs. Food* to reveal how meat consumption is deemed a masculine act. Men’s Health critiques vegetarianism, a diet that is not for any “real man,” though increasingly vegan and vegetarian athletes are being celebrated for their physical prowess (Rothgerber 2013). *Man vs. Food* displays the sexualization and feminization of meat used in meat consumption, as the host Richardson calls his steak “she” and says he found a sandwich he wants to “make love to” (Calvert 2014:26).

Adams (1990) is one of the most well-known authors of eco-feminist critiques of meat eating. She defines the meat/patriarchy relationship, claiming that adopting a vegan lifestyle subverts the domination of women and nonhuman animals, countering the social norm in “mainstream Western foodways” (Adams 1990, Nath 2010:263). Adams work is quite divisive; while some authors celebrate this model of critique of meat consumption, others worry that the arguments provide fodder for the patriarchy, an increased assertion of precisely the domination Adams is trying to subvert (Birke 1995). I hesitate to embrace Adam’s demand that veganism is the only way to engage with meat as a feminist woman. Veganism can be an exclusive diet and culture, and though I think some of Adams’ tenets are strong, I believe there are other pathways to engaging critically with meat for those whom veganism is not currently possible, though that is not the primary focus of this research.

Additionally, Adams connection of the commercialized use of women’s bodies for sex and the oppression of animals “excludes the voices and experiences of human sex workers” and fails to add nuance to “the convergences *and* divergences between violence against animals and sex workers” (Hamilton 2016:113-114). Hamilton (2016) challenges Adams’ (1990) thesis “that pornography and prostitution provide apt metaphors for animal slaughter and meat consumption” (Hamilton 2016:114).

In addition to the association of meat consumption with masculinity, meat preparation is a sphere in which patriarchal gender roles are being performed. Women often are expected to provide food for the family, and participate in that domestic sphere. “Women’s kitchen labor is taken for granted by all,” and a number of researchers include statements of men who would not be interested in a woman who could not prepare his favorite meat dish (Gvion 2011, Neuhaus 1999, Timeo and Suitner 2017).

For men, food preparation most often comes into play when meat is involved; for some communities that is particular to the barbecue or grill. One cookbook from 1958, *The Picture Cook Book* states definitively, “when it’s a matter of steak, this tolerant attitude is replaced by an unassailable belief in masculine know-how. Steak is a man’s Job” (Neuhaus 1999:542). The barbecue is a male dominated sphere (Nath 2010), and when men are cooking, it “is not often out of necessity” but rather a way to sustain traditional culture or engage in masculine behavior, like grilling (Gvion 2011:413).

In meat butchery as well, masculinity reigns. Feminization of word choice is examined in slaughterhouses by Erika Cudworth. Her research is presented by Jovian Parry (2010), who writes “in her on-site interviews with British meat industry workers, sociologist Erika Cudworth found that animals who were not docile or easily manageable were frequently labeled ‘cunts’ or ‘bitches’” (383). Back in the 17th century, Spinoza’s *Ethics* argued that opposition to animal slaughter was connected to “womanish pity,” indicating a weakness of the female population that prevented them from participating in slaughter (Spinoza 1677).

In regards to modern day female butchers, Comniou (1995) wonders if animal slaughter is a way for women to become like the white male at the cost of animals, indicating butchery to be a claiming of male identity, rather than feminine transformation of the profession. She wonders whether women who butcher simply take on more masculine traits in order to become acceptable, or if someone who exhibits more stereotypically feminine traits can persist in the industry. Halberstam’s notion of “female masculinity” might offer a more nuanced approach to women who butcher, rather than demanding such a stark division of the masculine and feminine (1998). Women who butcher are quite diverse in terms of their associations with typical



masculine/feminine traits and expectations, and many women, in this field and elsewhere, blend traits in the performance of their gender.

### • Research Methods •

For a full description of my research methods, see Appendix A. This project focused on women in the United States, who work professionally as butchers. Though women worldwide participate in meat processing and butchery, there is an absence of women in professional butchery spaces. Structural forces keep women out of this professional sphere, and the prevention of professionalization is a mechanism used to marginalize women in many industries, including those connected to food systems. Women who work as professional butchers are challenging these impediments to their career opportunities, so this is where my focus lies. Semistructured interviews provided the primary data for this project, the results of which are found in the following chapters. Photos of some of the butchers interviewed can be found in Appendix B.

### • Knowledge Politics and Validation •

My interview data guided me to an analysis of how women's knowledge is devalued in many environments. I am specifically engaging with components of Donna Haraway's (1988) arguments about the falseness of objectivity in science, and concepts raised in Garry and Pearsall's (1996) *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*. Haraway notes the "unmarked positions of Man and White" which are usually the basis of objectivity (581). Where white men's knowledge is considered objective and authoritative, women's knowledge is often considered skewed by

emotion, a subjective, less reliable form of information. This is true in the sciences, but is translated to other industries, including that of butchery.

Though doubting knowledge is not explicit violence, it is a form of gender bias which limits women's access to and success in their relationships and workplaces. Men are presented as the holders of butchery knowledge, and women in the field must resist that presentation in order to have their work and experience validated. Swidler and Ardit (1994), explain that "if women are responsible for the private, relational aspects of social life and are excluded from public systems of authority, they are less likely to participate in what is currently taken to be universal, analytic, objective knowledge" (321). Women who work with meat, though not limited to the private sphere, are pushed away from public authority. With public authority as one of the strongest validating forces for knowledge, these butchers are denied the validity of their understanding of their profession.

However, the women I interviewed are taking steps to resist that denial of knowledge. Haraway seeks out "those ruled by partial sight and limited voice—not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected opening situated knowledge makes possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals" (590). It is in this vein that my interviewees pursue communal sharing of knowledge and networks of education, a way to validate their work and learning.

### • Central Argument •

Women butchers face gender-based oppression when their knowledge of butchery is doubted or devalued. These women resist this oppression by acting as educators in their communities and investing in shared communal knowledge. Still, these women often receive some validation as a result of privileged racial and class identities, and more effort needs to be

placed upon valuing the work and rights of women of color and women from low income communities, who are more likely to be working in industrial facilities than small scale butcheries. Solidarity among women who work with meat can create a strong movement towards building a more just and equitable food system.

### • Overview of Chapters •

Chapter I provides a historical contextualization of the currently dominant meat processing system in the United States. It links the process of expanding meat markets with colonial invasion. Additionally, it provides a look into the inequity that is to be found in the way most meat is produced and processed in the United States. The politics of “good meat” are explored, as well as injustice which permeates the meat processing system. Many butchers spoke of an interest in changing the food system, and of valuing the many people who are involved, so this explanation is a necessary framework for what precisely they are working to change.

Chapter II details the sexism and gender bias women who work with meat encounter. It offers a theoretical framework of masculinity and male domination through which to understand the experiences shared by the women interviewed. These women share stories of receiving different treatment than their male coworkers, doubt as to their knowledge and skill, and environments where they felt pushed out because of their identities. This chapter also builds on Chapter I by further addressing ways in which other identities (ex. race, class, citizenship status) change women’s experiences in the meat world.

Chapter III identifies the ways these women are validating their knowledge and experience through education and community connections. This chapter provides details about Grrls Meat Camp, one of the major international communities for women who work with meat,

and a central entity in the lives of the women I interviewed. It also shows the struggles for building solidarity among women in meat processing, and an example of what that solidarity could offer.

The conclusion centers the importance of solidarity in the meat processing industry and recognition of women's knowledge across industries. There is a discussion of possibilities for changing the meat processing system to better support workers and a mention of long term goals of women in the field, to achieve a truly gender neutral understanding of their profession.

## Chapter One

### Historical and Present Day Injustices in US Meat Systems

This chapter will identify the inequity and unsustainability in the historical and current meat production and processing system in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Many of the women I spoke to remarked that they see their work as one way to develop a healthier food system and so an understanding of what the butchers believe they are working to change is essential to the framing of this paper. This chapter will identify the major economic, environmental, and colonial shifts in the dominant US meat production and processing system in the 19th century, then trace how those shifts play out in today's meat production and processing system, both in meatpacking plants and small butcher shops. As Connell explains, "the politics of masculinity cannot concern only questions of personal life and identity. It must also concern questions of social justice" (2001:43). This chapter serves to situate butchery in issues of justice, related primarily to gender, race, and class identities, and environmental justice.

In considering injustice in the meat production and processing system, it is important to think of ways to create solidarity between the women who do this work at all scales, all of whom are subject to various oppressions. Small scale butchery, animal raising, and slaughter, offers great benefits for worker safety, improved quality of meat, and environmental sustainability. Yet focusing on this path runs the risk of marginalizing workers in industrial packinghouses, many of whom already hold identities which are harshly marginalized in the US. How can the United States support ecological health and workers rights while simultaneously supporting livelihoods for the thousands who are currently employed in industrial meat production? How can we productively acknowledge and address the problem of gender, race, and class working as social

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, meat production and processing system includes transportation.

structures in the overall meat system? These are questions which must be considered in order to build more just food systems.

• **Shifts in the Meat Processing and Production System in the 19th Century** •

A meat production and processing system is a term which encompasses all the components which allow an area—such as the United States—to raise animals for meat and to slaughter and break down those animals to be consumed by people or utilized in industry. Some major components of this system are 1) livestock and livestock farmers 2) feed producers 3) slaughtering and processing facilities and 4) transportation mechanisms linking production and processing units. In my historical analysis, I will include some information about meat production, but the majority of this thesis focuses on meat processing.

The meat system in the United States underwent a massive change during the late 19th century, sparking a shift in both consumption and employment patterns. As technological innovations became widely accessible, especially railroads and refrigeration, meat production shifted towards an industrial process. In many regions of the US, families with a few heads of cattle and farmers bringing pigs to the local market became a thing of the past. Meat could be raised in large facilities in the Midwest, slaughtered, processed, and packed in rapid time, and shipped off to the furthest reaches of the country (Cronon 1991).

Meat went from a product of many small scale, local systems, to a more centralized, large scale system with a national reach. This growth was a product both of technological innovation and of colonial expansion. The Great Plains were home to many indigenous communities and to large populations of bison, which were central to the food consumption of the Plains residents. The native populations had a food system of their own, rooted in cycles of migration and limited

hunting, that allowed for a stability of food sources, as well as land and soil regeneration. As the number of settlers in the Plains increased, bison were killed in mass numbers, left to rot where they died, critically changing the eating lifestyle of the various indigenous communities who lived on the Plains.

Many bison were hunted for sport or pelts rather than for meat. William Cronon (1991) has described the market for bison leather, but the rate of hunting far exceeded any demand for parts. Bison hunting was a display of control and invasion by white men moving in from the East. Railroads, central to the growing meat system, disrupted migration patterns and put bison at even greater risk, being more accessible to hunters. As bison populations were decimated, cattle were moved in, accompanied by new tools and lifestyle requirements that changed the equilibrium of the Plains food system. “Livestock, fences, and suppressed fires all accelerated the demise of the older grassland ecology that Indians and Bison had constructed on the plains” (Cronon 1991:220).

Indigenous communities were not the only population affected by a changing meat system. Local butchers were displaced by mechanized packinghouses, and the demand for unskilled laborers to work in the plants grew rapidly. For the purposes of this paper, meatpacking plants—or packinghouses—are defined as wholesale facilities where meat is processed for future sale. While there are facilities which only complete one part of the action—such as slaughter—many are large enough to have multiple actions taking place at once. The “processing” component includes the breaking down of the animal into parts, and the packing of parts into sellable arrangements. In this paper, butchers and butchery will mark small scale meat production facilities, which engage primarily in the processing and sale of meat. Some butchers do perform slaughter themselves, but this is not so common with the smaller shops.

Packinghouses could do more production more efficiently than butchers, which encouraged their growing dominance. However, from their inception, these facilities produced great amounts of waste, contaminated local water supplies, and put employees at great risk.

Early packinghouses were located in Chicago, later to be found in a few other urban spaces. As Cronon described late 19th century Chicago, “packingtown remained one of the smelliest and most environmentally degraded neighborhoods in all of Chicago, and the water that flowed from its sewers was extraordinarily foul” (Cronon 1991:252). Those living in the area were subject to health risks from the toxic environment. Those risks remain today, and respondent Sam emphasized “the toll industrial meat takes on the environment as well as the risk factors for those who work in industrial operations (as well as community members who live near these sites).”

#### • **Environmental Degradation and the Politics of Good Meat** •

Sam’s concern of the toll of industrial meat is echoed by many butchers, environmentalists, and animal rights activists. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) are an integral part of today’s meat production system, and are responsible for environmental degradation and health risks, as well as abuse of animal welfare. These facilities raise animals for meat, and are notorious for large populations in insufficiently large spaces. Though CAFOs are known for cheap production and low costs, there are hidden externalities, “associated with the damage caused by water and air pollution (along with cleanup and prevention), the costs borne by rural communities (e.g., lower property values), and the costs associated with excessive antibiotic use (e.g., harder-to-treat human disease)” (Gurlan-Sherman, 2008:1).



Communities who live near CAFOs, as well as those who exist around industrial packinghouses, suffer in the same way as those in 19th century Chicago, still encountering stench, feces runoff into water supplies and agricultural land, and other subpar conditions. These communities are often socially and economically marginalized, and so have little voice in expressing concern over the conditions that surround their homes (Stull and Broadway 2004).<sup>2</sup>

With this social and environmental unsustainability in mind, many of the butchers I spoke with urge consumers to buy less meat, but better quality, from local farms and butchers. Anna explained “when I was looking for a job after I left Whole Foods, I really wanted to be a whole animal shop where they have locally sourced animals where it was healthier, better quality meat. You’re eating less meat, but you’re eating better quality meat, which is really important.”

But “better quality meat” is surrounded by a lot of complications regarding access, price, and connotations of judgment. Mara shared that “part of why I got really into butchery is that the discourse around good meat is something that I really don’t like. I think that it comes from this place of everyone should eat good meat but let’s not think about the actual systemic factors that prevent people from eating good meat. So, wanting to get into the industry to try to open it up more.” When people talk about good meat, they are often giving it that valuation because it is meat from an animal raised in an environmentally conscious way, by farmers who receive a fair price for their labor and work, and consumed within a small distance from where the animal was raised.

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<sup>2</sup> In the United States, we regularly place marginalized communities as a “first line of defense” against risk. Nuclear power plants, which pose great threat if technical failures occur, are often found nearest to poor communities. Hurricane Katrina had the most devastating impact on the primarily Black, low income residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. The devastation was a product of the ways city design prioritized protecting wealthy white communities, leaving the Lower Ninth to bear the brunt of all that Katrina brought.

Yet, not everyone can afford or access or desire “good meat.” Mara pointed out that “good meat is such a high priced commodity in the food world,” and Lisa explained that “people, where we are, where our meat shop is, have a little bit more money to spend. But there is this divide in that community, so [this part of town is] like old money, lots of it. And there’s a kind of a, there’s a line through [the town], of people who can and cannot afford to shop in our shop.” While Lisa advocates for eating less meat but paying more for local, high quality meat, she understands that not everyone has such an ability. For folks who can’t access “good meat,” for whatever reason, must their meat, and thus their eating habits, be bad? What is a feminist, justice-based approach that considers both the need for environmental sustainability and fair wages, as well an acceptance of food cultures and the valuation of folks who aren’t spending lots of cash on high-end meat?

Sam has grappled with the complexity of the issue, arguing that “I am able to show my feminism by choosing to work for a company that treats its workers and its farmers fairly. I’ve heard a lot of times that meat is inherently anti-feminist- that it represents violence and male-dominion. I reject that idea, or rather would change that to industrial meat can be anti-feminist. However meat is cultural and to advocate eating less of it, or eating it differently takes on a pretty white, ethnocentric narrative. People should have access to the food of their choice, that food should be grown in a way that respects workers and the environment (and by proxy the people forced to live in that environment).” Rudy (2012) suggests that a feminist analysis could be one of the ways to combat the elitism of the locavore meat movement, by finding ways to include all women in “resisting agricultural practices that are destroying the plant” (33). Sam and Rudy’s recognition of these dynamics help us consider the complexity of these issues, but there is still much work to be done to balance the needs for many types of justice in the meat system.

The next section will elaborate on the current injustices in meatpacking which need to be considered in developing a just meat processing system.

### • Injustice in Meatpacking •

The employees of packinghouses come from communities marginalized in US society. Though butchery and meatpacking have much commonality, meatpacking is considered unskilled labor, while butchery is a craft trade. Meatpacking has always been blue collar work, though in its early days this was limited mostly to white and Black employees in urban centers. When the location of packinghouses shifted, so did the employee base. In pursuit of a new labor force, companies actively recruited immigrants to work in the plants. “As a result, packinghouse towns have been subject to rapid growth as well as ethnic, cultural, and linguistic transformation” (Stull and Broadway 2004:16). Citizenship status and English-language proficiency factor into some employees’ ability to and safety in pushing for better working conditions.

The workforce composed mostly of working class people of color, immigrant or native born, is subject to immense risk every day on the job. “The reported injury and illness rate for meatpacking was...three times above the average manufacturing rate” (Stull and Broadway 2004:75). Faulty machinery and messy floors both pose risks to employees each day. Breaks are few and far between, and workers have explained how their employers give break times which are too short, especially when considering one can only remove protective gear and wash off animal residue during this break period, leaving only minutes for actual rest (Ribas 2016).

Jobs for immigrants in the meat processing system are concentrated in packinghouses and other industrial sectors (Ribas 2016, Stull and Broadway 2004), and are rare in small scale

butchery. One interviewee, Lily, pointed out how strongly the system cycles immigrants into industry jobs, regardless of prior experience; “There are actually people of color who come from other countries who come to rural Maine as asylum seekers or refugees who, like, you know, had been Halal butchers in their home nations and they, a lot of them end up working in the meat processing facilities in the States. But not in supervisory capacities or anything like that.”

This hierarchy of racialized and classed labor is one that is often simply accepted as a part of the meat processing system we currently have. However, the pursuit of a more just and more sustainable meat production and processing system would require more solidarity between industrial and non industrial laborers, and a valuation of the many folks involved in the labor that get the meat to the table. Lily hopes to use her position of financial security to push for food systems change in this direction. “When we’re building these healthy food systems...the piece that often gets left out is the social sustainability component. Like are we really ensuring that people are being compensated fairly for this work, at all levels of production? So not just the farmers but also the meat processors. And like the dishwashers and the people who just come for chicken slaughter day once a week...it’s the place that people feel most comfortable cutting corners.”

### • Gender Dynamics in Meatpacking •

While meatpackers all face risk and stress in their line of work, women are subject to additional stress as a result of strong gender bias. Women in many working class positions experience a sense of unbelonging, challenged with the masculine ideals of their work. “The physical demands of many blue-collar, industrial working-class jobs put a premium on toughness, which in turn may help to reinforce a macho gender culture among working-class

men” (Wright 1997:120). This macho culture is especially present in the meat industry, a particularly physical job. Segregation of tasks is common, and one worker in a London meat market called his place of work “a bastion of male dominance” (Cudworth 2011:166). Connell argues that this “ideal of working-class manliness and self-respect was constructed in response to class deprivation and paternalist strategies of management, at the same time and through the same gestures as it was defined against working class women” (2001:37).

This is not to deny the presence of women in meatpacking. In the plant where Ribas (2016) was located, “women made up close to half the workers in the Cut Floor and Loin Boning and Packing Departments, and an even higher share in Bacon Slice, Dry Salt, and Microwavery” (45). Still, meat processing is coded masculine in dominant US representation, and positions of management are “all but closed off to women” (Ribas 2016:40). Support for women in meatpacking could shift if they had more access to managerial positions; “having women in higher-level positions of authority in a workplace improves the status of women employed there and reduces gender inequalities in outcomes such as earnings” (Ribas 2016:157).

The masculine environment many butchers, including those I interviewed, find at their places of work is likely increased when found in the industrial workforce. All workers are silenced in some regard, risking loss of their jobs if they speak back to management, and women particularly struggle with that loss of voice (Stull and Broadway 2004). Surrounded by men calling their meat “cunt” or “bitch” when the animal/part does not cooperate, some meatpacking women may feel particularly out of place in their work (Cudworth 2011).

These women have much in common with women in small butcher shops, as is explored in the following chapter. However, the two groups boast very different demographics. Can professional, small scale butchery reflect the diverse populations we see in meatpacking? Do

people of color, particularly women see it as an industry that welcomes them? Sam stated “I think shop owners are very particular about curating the face of the shop. I'm not sure how much whiteness has to do with that, but working at the shop for over two years and interviewing all sorts of people for potential jobs, there hasn't really been any people of color who have even applied.” She recognized that this is an issue, and that she has heard very little trying to change that. Additionally, everyone Sam works with has a college degree, and there's an expectation in the industry that because you are learning a craft, you have to pay a lot of money upfront or work for very little while you learn the skills, something which greatly privileges workers with financial support.

Lily recommends that an organization in her area start “providing opportunities for like, for immigrant butchers, which there are, or Black butchers or working class butchers...sort of like support their businesses by channeling some of the immense resources they have amassed through, like, being well respected white chefs who work with meat into some of these other neighborhoods.” Ideally, that work would create more opportunities for those excluded from meat processing fields, and also, as Lily mentioned, “muddy the idea that only white people with prestige can teach these skills.”

Though I was unable to reach them for interviews, I was tipped off to a few folks in NYC who are actively working on making butchery a more accessible space particularly for women of color. The work is beginning to be done, and it is important work. Already, communities who have faced oppression in the United States are pushing for versions of food justice which are linked to other fights for justice. Though I have yet to see many examples of this work connected explicitly to butchery, there is opportunity to include work related to meat production and

processing in the fight for more just food systems. The sharing of knowledge, as is explored in chapter three, is one way the women I've interviewed are interacting with the pursuit of justice.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Sexism and Gender Bias in the Workplace**

This chapter identifies how sexism and gender hierarchy interfere with women butchers' acquisition of knowledge, and the recognition of their acquired knowledge. Examples are drawn primarily from my interview data, but also from historical research, scholarly inquiries, and popular news media interviews with women who work with meat. Little scholarship has focused directly on the forms of gender bias that women who process meat encounter. Yet, these women work in an incredibly masculine environment, formed both from the equation of meat and masculinity, as discussed in the introduction, and the macho atmosphere prevalent in manual labor industries. From the cutting floor to the point of sale, women in the industry have to navigate the barriers, and sometimes opportunities, their gender identity entails. As my data revealed that the doubting of knowledge is one of the major frustrations these women experience in their work lives, this chapter situates the validation of knowledge within a system of gender hierarchy.

#### **• Women Butchers in History •**

As this chapter intends to recognize the struggle for validation women butchers experience, this section will provide evidence of women butchers in history, who faced struggles with many of the same roots in gender hierarchy that women face today. The women I interviewed for this project are not the first of their kind; historians have located women butchers in medieval and Renaissance Europe, particularly in Germany. One Renaissance man, attempting to capitalize on a law where widows were responsible for their husband's debt if active in the work, described his neighbor's industriousness; "she stood at the butcher's counter herself,



weighed out the meat, took in money, melted tallow, made candles, sold the candles and other things. After his death, she also slaughtered four head of cattle and received the money for them.” Facing such an accusation, this butcher adamantly denied her own knowledge of the business, playing on perceptions of women’s ignorance and incapability with butchery work to avoid having to pay the debts (Wisener 1986:30). Still, it seems likely that her skill and activity were high, adamant though she was in downplaying her role so as to avoid the financial costs.

Historians’ research shows that women only worked in shops owned by their husbands or fathers, and some continued in the practice as widows, like the aforementioned woman. Though these women were permitted to work in the business, the top level of ownership and management was reserved for men. This exemplifies one of the ways gender operates in a professional environment; in most professions, women are kept from the top levels of management. “Having women in higher-level positions of authority in a workplace improves the status of women employed there and reduces gender inequalities in outcomes such as earnings,” but in meat processing facilities, as in many other workplaces, women are rare in those positions of authority (Ribas 2016: 157).

During the 1200s in Frankfurt, independent female master butchers “could only practice if they were widows and ran their dead husband’s business with the help of a journeyman.” Male supervision was essential to avoid legal ramifications, regardless of skill. Still, changing times meant changing ideals, and in 1397, Cologne passed a charter that “granted men and women an equal position in the [butcher’s] guild as long as they had Cologne citizenship.” Seventy years later, Leipzig permitted widows of butchers *and* other women who were familiar with the trade to be active members of the guild (Utiz 1990:58).

However, the path to autonomy is not a linear one, and charters granting women rights to butchery employment only affected individual cities. In some regions in the Renaissance period, women were confined to making sausages and cheese, kept from the work of slaughter and sale, work reserved for men. Sometimes, they were given a choice, as in Memmingen, where “butcher’s widows had to choose between making sausage and handling fresh meat; they were not allowed to do both” (Wiesner 1986:114). Though women in Memmingen held knowledge of both sausage making and meat processing, it was determined by men that they were unable to perform both activities. These external restrictions subordinated women in the workplace, maintaining men’s position of authority in the meat processing world.

#### • Acquisition of Knowledge •

That position of authority held by men is readily apparent in access to knowledge. Butchery is a trade heavily dependent on the passing down of knowledge. Butchers take years to master the work of breaking down an animal, and the guidance of mentors is the most common approach by which to learn that mastery. Ashley explained how exciting it can be to take part in such a trade; “it’s just cool to be part of this passing down of knowledge. Even in jobs that I’ve been heavily trained in, it doesn’t feel as much like a literal apprenticeship as this has, you know, really working with this man who has done this his whole life and his family has done it their whole lives, and here. It’s just been so cool, it feels so old fashioned at times.” This apprenticeship is a big part of many butchers’ training, and helps maintain a craft trade which has persisted despite the industrialization of the meat processing system. Lisa, who describes her self-taught method of butchery as “Youtube butchering,” marks a newer alternative to the traditional apprenticeship, but even she had a base of information created through relationship

building and answered curiosity. “Neither my husband or I had butchering experience, but we did have experience with cuts, and ordering the whole animal, and kind of what we wanted and how it looked, and pricing, and things like that.”

But women entering the meat world face particular barriers to acquiring this knowledge, often attempting to learn in an environment of full-fledged performative masculinity. Workplace culture can act as a deterrent for women who wish to enter the fields of butchery and meatpacking, shaped both from the way meat itself can be treated and referred to, and the ways that the women are treated directly. Erika Cudworth studied meatpacking in Britain, and found that animals, and the meat that comes from them, is referred to with distinctly gendered and sexualized language. “Animals who were not docile or easily manageable were frequently labeled ‘cunts’ or ‘bitches’ ... animals of either sex tend to be feminized metaphorically at the slaughterhouse by these sorts of insults” (2011:164). This language is being used in a workplace which one employee described as “a bastion of male dominance” (166). That bastion is part of a long-standing tradition of men who butcher, at the exclusion of women. So far back as the 17th century, Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza “dismissed opposition to animal slaughter as based upon superstition and womanish pity,” indicating that women would be unfit to perform the act of slaughter (Parry 2010:384).

In the packinghouse Cudworth studied, she identified “a gendered division of labor that prevents women engaging in the heavier manual work, the use of heavy machinery, and certain tasks involving larger animals” (Cudworth 2011:166). Women are more likely to be found working in the cleaner areas with smaller pieces of meat, like “lightweight meat packing or the local government inspectorate concerned with quality control and hygiene” (166). This is a structural impediment to women’s ability to learn the process of breaking down large animals.

Gender in the workplace operates both on the level of organizational policy, and the level of interpersonal relationships and workplace culture. Though this latter level is more individual than official workplace structure, it is shaped by larger social institutions and cultural norms that define how gender can exist in a place of work. Women in meat processing must navigate a myriad of impediments on both levels in order to obtain the training and skill building necessary for their work.

Lily's story shows how much of an impact workplace culture can have on skill building and training, which is so vital to success in the field. To set the stage, Lily shared with me that "for the majority of my time working in that space, I was the only female presenting person who worked there. That changed a little bit towards the end of my time there, but I'd say probably for a year, a little over a year, I was the only, like, non-straight, cisgender man working there."

Lily's team had told her from the start that she should feel free to say something if anything bothered her or any issues came up, but when things did start happening, her speaking up was met with resistance. "Any time I would actually say anything, I felt like I was, like, sort of being a fuddy duddy and I got really really tired of it really quickly so I just sort of stopped doing it. It kind of wore me down." Lily was being worn down by the many jokes and comments being made in the shop that were "misogynistic or homophobic or racist." This atmosphere is hard to challenge, especially when challenge is met with resistance, or puts the challenger potentially at risk in the future; "when faced with men's sexual jokes, women often have no other choice than to exclude themselves or participate, at least passively, in order to try and integrate themselves, but then running the risk of no longer being able to protest if they are victims of sexism or sexual harassment" (Bourdieu 2001:68).

Lily later found out from a male coworker that the comments she was around to hear were not the only ones being made. “Something that I didn’t know was happening until he told me, which is that [my male coworkers] would say wildly inappropriate and sort of sexually explicit things about the women who worked there. And customers and things.” This atmosphere was one which both made Lily uncomfortable generally, and had implications for her skill-building and ability to learn the trade of butchery.

Lily reflected that “learning the actual technical skills was challenging for me because in order to do that I felt like I had to tune out everything that was being said around me all the time...I honestly think I could have lasted longer there and maybe progressed further if it weren’t for some of that stuff happening around me.” Though she *did* progress further, and now works to share her knowledge with others—as explored in the following chapter—Lily was putting in lots of resources to a space that impeded her goal of learning more about butchery.

Some of the other respondents have been criticized or impeded by their identity as mothers, which is simply another mode of the barriers to knowledge acquisition women meat processors may face. Christine has gotten comments that she is unmotherly because of her chosen profession, and the fact that she allows her children to see and participate in some of it. She doubted that men who take their kids hunting receive the same kind of interrogation about their parenting. While Lisa hasn’t ever been told she is unmotherly, she did find that her role as a mom affected her relationships with “old school traditional farmers.” She explained that her responsibilities for her son meant she wasn’t always able to build quite as strong networks, and that some folks viewed that as a reason she shouldn’t be active in the field. “I would have to run out and get my kid, and I wouldn’t be able to have those conversations. Kind of like, lingering with farmers or customers.”

Lisa, a self-taught butcher and a mom, contradicts the kind of learning and identities of learners that is most accepted in the meat processing industry. Producing knowledge outside of the accepted modes or identities puts one at risk of challenge from the industry norm. Patricia Hill Collins has detailed this process for Black women in academia, who are outside validated knowledge creation simply because of their identities. “While Black women can produce knowledge claims that contest those advanced by the white male community, this community does not grant that Black women scholars have competing knowledge claims based in another knowledge-validation process” (Garry and Pearsall 1996:226). Outsiders to the validated community of knowers, in any field, will struggle to obtain effective training and to have any knowledge they acquire be validated and recognized.

#### • Recognition of Knowledge •

This section focuses on the lack of recognition of women butchers’ knowledge, once they have acquired it through whatever means. Knowledge is often considered an objective phenomenon, and as Haraway explained, that objectivity is most commonly associated with white men, whose knowledge is thus validated (1988:581). Another way to understand it is that a prevalent underlying assumption is that “knowers are detached, neutral spectators, and the objects of knowledge are separate from them, inert items in the observational knowledge-gathering process” (Garry and Pearsall 1996:193).

Though women in butchery can be detached, neutral observers in their training, popular assumption dissociates women from objective knowledge. When considering what is often lauded as women’s “knowledge,” it is *not* detached. Women are considered innately nurturing and caring; the knowledge of rearing children is labeled not as something learned through

detached observation but a result of internal understanding, inherent to our being, our identity as women. Thus, in a field which is not directly connected to these accepted forms of women's knowledge, a field which requires some level of "objective" understanding, women butchers are not recognized as valid butchers. Their identity as women is in tension with their identity as skilled meat processors, and coworkers and customers alike reveal discomfort with that tension. In Cudworth's study, this tension was made clear in the words of a male butcher, who had only trained one woman to butcher in his many years of mentoring. He said "she was really very good, strong as an ox and hard as nails. Not much like a woman at all" (2011:167). In his eyes, one cannot be both a woman and good at butchery.

Mara acknowledged outright, "I'm a pretty small woman and that's not who you expect to be a butcher." That societal equation of butcher and maleness renders many of these women invisible in their place of work. Jessica Wragg, a London butcher, in a feature with *VICE*, shared that "one time, I was in the shop with a male trainee who'd only been there a couple of weeks. A customer came in and when I asked how I could help, he looked straight through me and started talking to the trainee. The trainee had no idea how to answer any of the questions so after a while, I stepped in and asked, 'Do you want me to answer your questions?' There'll always be people who'll look through you to the man standing next to you" (Wragg 2017). The customer's assumption that the male trainee was the employee with the highest skill set reflects that bias against women's knowledge, despite the reality of the situation. Wragg's individual experience evidences a larger social issue where men's knowledge and presence is more validated than women's. When she asserts that "there'll always be people who'll look through you to the man standing next to you," Wragg is hitting on the fact that in the working of gender, men are made intensely visible, while women are often made invisible. There is a pattern of women butchers

encountering similar situations of being made invisible at work, or having their knowledge of the craft not recognized.

Sam shared on this topic, saying,

it's not uncommon to get men who will seek out any male in the shop before they will approach me or one of the other very competent women. The amount of times a man has walked in and made a b-line for the vegetarian cheese-monger to ask him about steaks has become a bit of a running joke. I've had a customer order a cut from me and then amended his order by asking, 'actually, could you tell him to cut an extra pound?' when there were no men working in the shop.

Lisa would be in on this joke as well. She shared that "for the first five months that I was in the shop, it was always, 'can you have your husband call me when...' And he was never there. He didn't work there." Those presumptions stick with her; "The biggest thing was, and that sticks with me still, is that 'where's your husband?' You know, we were both green, but it was assumed that he knew more than I did. And I had to teach him a bunch of stuff when he got laid off [his old job] and came on."

These instances connect to Williams' analysis of women working in nontraditional occupations, particularly the Marines. Williams argues that men are often territorial about women entering traditionally male-dominated professions. "The heart of the matter is this: the sexual stratification of work reflect men's inability to accept women as equals; it is not the result of different personality traits possessed by women and men" (1989:141). Customers and coworkers alike subordinate women butchers and meatpackers through their language and official policy. Asking for Lisa's husband while she is providing expertise information subordinates her beneath him. Christine has a higher response rate when she uses the name Chris



on her resume; though identical in every way (no different traits) the guise of maleness makes a resume more successful (women are not equal).

Even if customers or employers do not explicitly ask for a man, women butchers encounter apprehension regularly in their positions. Ashley explained “when I first started working, people definitely looked at me a certain way...I tried to take their order for if they wanted steaks on the grill, and they definitely thought that I didn’t understand what they were asking for. Which sometimes was true and that’s fair, but since then it hasn’t been true.” When Mara was asked how her gender identity affects her work, she echoed Ashley’s experience, saying “some of the people don’t take me as seriously, both the people that I work with and people that are over me.”

Gender bias does not always impede women who are trying to enter the field. In some cases, looking different from the stereotypical butcher has its advantages. Anna explained, “the guys who I’ve met, I’m very lucky, are very interested in a woman who wants to be in meat...I think that being a girl who was there actually really helped me because I stuck out. When you’re one of the only girls, you stick out. It’s nice in some ways. I don’t feel like anybody has really doubted me because I’m a woman, which is good.” When Anna attended an international meat workers gathering,<sup>3</sup> she found that people’s curiosity over a woman entering the meat world meant she made many connections, traded business cards, and was able to build quite a network.

Mara has also found that the surprise of her interest in meat can open up opportunities, just as it can close doors; “It is almost like my identity [as a woman] has helped in this because it’s kind of the shock factor.” Though her identity has given her the chance to speak with many different people about their shared passion, she still has faced discomfort in her workplace

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<sup>3</sup> Butcher’s Manifesto in Copenhagen

because of her gender. Mara often gets called “sweetie or honey” by men who come into the shop, and she remarked on the fatigue of facing the same old sexism she has to navigate in the other parts of her life. “It’s just an interesting thing in that setting where it’s a pretty rough and tough setting and yet at the same time you’re still facing that misogyny that you see everywhere from customers and stuff.”

For most of the women I spoke to, the ways their gender identity shapes their work is a mixed bag. Gender bias plays out in many ways, on both sides of the shop counter, but there is also great power in challenging that bias and reshaping people’s expectations of who a butcher can be. Ashley is an openly gay woman and believes that her presentation—and visits from her girlfriend—makes that visible to those around her. At the start of her employment, she knew her boss had preconceptions about gay women in general and about women’s ability to work with meat. Still, Ashley feels she has been able to challenge those preconceptions, and gives her boss credit for being willing to change his mind. “I think it’s been powerful in terms of their conceptions to watch me defy their own and other’s expectations. That’s been really rewarding as well to know that maybe they think differently about women, or gay women, and what they’re capable of, based on the work that I’ve done for them.”

### • Conclusions •

Women who work with meat, whether they are in packinghouses, butcher shops, restaurants and more, face much of the sexism that permeates so many workplaces in the US. They have to go above and beyond to acquire knowledge, and when they do so it is rarely validated or acknowledged by those around them. Though not a case of great violence, the invisibility of women’s work and skills upholds larger structures of women’s oppression, and it

is essential to challenge this invisibility and to respect and appreciate the work these women do.

The next chapter will explore the ways women who work with meat challenge this invisibility in their own work, and how they are investing in communal education to support more sustainable and just food systems.

## Chapter Three

### The Importance of Communal Knowledge and Building Solidarity

The previous chapter examined the barriers to women butchers' acquisition and recognition of knowledge. This chapter explores the ways these women are contesting those barriers, particularly through relationship building, community, and education. Unprompted, all of the women I interviewed spoke about the importance of acting as educators, to inform the public of ways to be involved in a more sustainable and equitable food system. They also found support to do so through organizations like Grrls Meat Camp, or other less official spaces of community. That pattern could not be ignored, and is a clear indicator of the way these women are carving out space for themselves in an industry which rarely gives an inch.

#### • Grrls Meat Camp •

A number of the women I spoke to came on my radar through Grrls Meat Camp (GMC). GMC is an international organization building networks for women in many fields of meat. The website explains that “the Grrls Meat Camp mission is to inspire, instruct, and initiate a sisterhood of farmers, butchers, cooks, and teachers by giving voice to women united by a common interest in food animals and meat” ([grrlsmeatcamp.com](http://grrlsmeatcamp.com) “About”). As that sentence indicates, there is an enormous variety of women—and some nonbinary members—who are part of the GMC community; professional butchers and chefs, home cooks, farmers, and more.

Everyone who I spoke with about GMC greatly valued the community they had found through such an organization. When Lily attended a GMC workshop, she said it was “a really energizing environment for me to sort of feel like I wasn’t alone in this experience of working in a male dominated environment.” Anna, talking about both GMC and other connections, said “I do like the sisterhood of female butchers that I seem to have found.” Sam agreed, explaining

“I’ve met some incredible women through groups like Grrls Meat Camp and if those are the new faces of this trade, I count myself lucky to be with them. They are serious about their craft, they are curious and want to be the best they can be.”

The Facebook page of GMC is quite active, and there is a huge network of people supporting one another, asking questions, and learning skills, both online and in real life. The “secret” page I am a part of has 886 members, and their public page has 945 likes. Christine, who was my first interviewee, had responded to a post on a different page (Butcher’s Guild), but said I had to check out GMC, as it was a wide network, and one of the most supportive she’d been a part of.

GMC places a large emphasis on building relationships and community for women who often face exclusion in their lines of work. As Lily explained, GMC made it clear to hear that the struggle of working in a male dominated environment was not one she alone was facing. GMC also validates the knowledge of the women of the group, challenging the devaluation of women’s knowledge that was identified in chapter two. Members regularly post questions about what to do with a particular cut of an animal, how to identify if an animal is in heat, or where they can learn more particular knife skills. Anyone and everyone can answer, allowing for a great resource of collective knowledge. Members connect a post to someone who may know more, and all the comments I’ve read have been very supportive. Lots of Grrls will also post celebratory pictures of a cut of meat or a carcass, as GMC is a space they feel comfortable being proud of their successes.

GMC is not only a facebook community, though that is the most accessible component of the organization. There are informal “Meat Ups,” which any member can propose to host. The Meat Ups are simply spaces for women to get together and chat about their work, their goals, and

whatever else may arise at the time; these events are free. Additionally, GMC runs regular workshops in different areas of the world. Any member can propose a workshop, offering “both a networking opportunity and a learning environment for grrls interested in home meat preparation and consumption, butchery, charcuterie, farming of meat animals, meat processing, meat-focused business, etc.” (Grrls Meat Camp “Workshops”).

The membership and workshops are less financially accessible than the Facebook community. Annual membership is \$125 per year—though \$50 for students—and the various official workshops seem to be much pricier. A weekend event in Vermont this year comes to \$550 for members, \$650 for non-members, if you attend both days. In part, these fees provide compensation to the hosts of the workshop for providing meat and official education, but this price point does make this component of GMC less accessible.

### • Butchers as Educators •

GMC is not the only way women can share knowledge about meat, and many women take educating into their own hands to share with their communities. Almost all of my interviewees spoke about themselves as educators, eager to share their knowledge about butchery with everyone, whether that be a fellow meat worker or someone making food for their family.

Lisa is an educator by training, having taught history for a number of years before getting into the food world. Even while she was a history teacher, Lisa had been working on getting her students connected to the food systems they participate in. That included a five dollar per kid field trip at the Meat Hook in NYC “where you go into the butchery, you meet the butchers. You butcher a primal, like we did a chuck<sup>4</sup>, they take the kids through the butchery.

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<sup>4</sup> Chuck refers to a chuck steak, a piece of meat from a cow’s shoulder.

And then you take them into the commercial kitchen and the kids make a full meal.” But her educating wasn’t just taking place in the classroom. “I think a lot of what I do on a day to day is teach...and so, a lot of the time when I work in the butcher shop, it would be telling people why eating this way is important. And really, convincing people to eat less meat.”

Though she’s moved away from teaching professionally, Lisa hopes to bring youth back into the work she does now, to develop understandings of food systems and access at an earlier age than many do. “I’d really love to bring in Middle and High School kids to talk about that. And maybe not, just to really have those conversations, you know? About what food looks like in their community. What access they have to it...if teachers aren’t in the classroom talking about that, and parents aren’t talking about that, it’s a real struggle for them to know why, or believe that it is important.” Being able to combat unjust food systems requires some understanding of how those systems are unjust, and Lisa is proposing a coordinated effort to make that understanding more widespread.

Sam is an educator by trade as well, but finds that her efforts to teach about her current profession are not met with so much interest. “I constantly want to talk about my work, but people don’t really have questions. They go to the grocery store, they pick up a labeled package, that’s kind of it. It can be frustrating at times.” Sam wants to help consumers see how their eating habits are connected to a larger food system.

Lily has had more success engaging her community with her work. She’s currently working on a project that serves to provide consumers with curriculum about ethical meat, which has meant a lot of workshop teaching. She explained,

what I’m really proud of is the fact that I have mastered those skills well enough that I can teach them to people...And mostly the people that I teach are either farmers or just like people who eat meat, not necessarily people who want to be professional butchers. Which I think is kind of

fantastic. Because, you know frankly, I don't feel like I've had enough experience to train other butchers to cut meat, but in terms of just like educating the public about what it is to work with meat and help them understand where it comes from and how it gets to them all the sort of nuances...of the system that gets meat from farm to table, that is a great feeling niche for me.

Though the sexist environment Lily was trained in kept her from building her skills as quickly as she hoped, education has been a tool to practice those skills and share them with others. Her communities have allowed her to participate in this industry in a way that most suits her own interests and identities. Lily recently co-facilitated a small animal butchery workshop for LGBTQ folks, and said "it was definitely the most comfortable I've ever felt in an educational environment."

These women are using education to build communities that support them and which they can support. Their identities as educators also serves to value their knowledge of their work. As chapter two revealed, women's knowledge when working with meat is not often recognized or appreciated. Women's identity as meat workers can become invisible in spaces where men dominate. When Anna was at a meat convention, she spent some time with two men who were there as participants, and their girlfriends, who were there simply accompanying their partners. Anna explained that both the men and the women support one another, and the women were "very pro-women in meat women, but they weren't there as on their own, which in some ways made me really sad, because they both should have been. They know their way around both meat and cooking. They could have been participants just as easily."

Taking on the role of sharing information with customers and the community is one way to combat women's invisibility as agents of the meat processing system. Ashley has experienced how sharing her knowledge, and being a present part of the community has meant more acceptance of gay women in the field. Her presence has shown "the more confidence other



people have in me and the less it matters who I am, and I think that's been really cool to see, I think, the effects of being a woman and a gay woman.” When I asked Ashley to share something she is proud of related to her work, she spoke about the valuation of her knowledge as well. “I feel like the moment I was most proud in the job was when I finally got to the point where I knew how to do everything in the shop and both my bosses could leave and I could be there knowing whatever anybody ordered, whatever I had to do, like grinding things, or butchering things, that I would be totally prepared and ready.”

Anna too has found joy in sharing her knowledge even within her own shop. She explained, “the more I know, and the more I can pass on, the happier I am.” She's gotten that opportunity with a new male coworker, who has been appreciative of her passing down of knowledge. “We have a new guy. Passing on little tips and tricks to him, and he's like, ‘thank you so much. That's actually a really big help.’ He's like ‘keep telling me the little tricks that are going to make my life easier.’ I'm like ‘I'm happy to tell you that.’”

Sam was fortunate in starting off in a shop that I had folks like Anna and these other women, happy to pass on tricks of the trade, putting value in her learning the work. “After some horror stories I've heard from other women in the field, I consider myself lucky to have found a shop where the management cared more about dedication to the task and a sincere interest to learn than keeping women out of the cut room.” Sam's experience contrasts that which Lily spoke about in chapter two. An environment where her knowledge and training was centered allowed Sam to feel comfortable and build her skills. As Sam mentions, many women are prevented from acquiring knowledge because of biased structures in the workplace, but Sam was part of an organization that valued the training of each of its employees, regardless of gender.

• **Challenges to Solidarity Between Butchers and Meatpackers** •

These butchers have found ways to share their knowledge in a communal way, using what they know to help consumers and cooks make decisions that support local farmers and meat processors, decisions which often minimize the environmental harm of meat systems. Yet, not all meat processors are able to do so. As discussed in chapter two, women butchers and industrial meat processors face a masculine environment where their knowledge and skills are often doubted. However, women working in meatpacking plants are in an even more precarious position when it comes to their work being valued. “Women throughout the United States have not experienced a common oppression as women. The processes of gender, race-ethnicity, and class—intrinsically interconnected—have been central forces determining and differentiating women’s work lives in US history” (Amott and Matthaei 1997:27).

As chapter one showed, the employees of packinghouses often come from low-income backgrounds and are majority POC and immigrants. These identities are marginalized in the United States, and industrial work is considered un-skilled. For women butchers, though they may face apprehension about their ability, their labor is still considered a craft by the outside world. For meatpackers, their labor is considered a simple task, undervalued by the American public, despite the fact that these people provide most of the meat the US population consumes.

There is a great challenge in forming solidarity between two populations who are seen very differently in US society. The tension between craft and industrial labor is long-standing, a factor since the time of the industrial revolution. That tension is amplified when considering the different identities in play for craft butchery and meatpacking. As great as GMC can be, it is a very white, middle to upper middle class community. Lily would challenge GMC “to take it even a little bit further because I couldn’t help but notice in that environment that was basically all

white women. And there really aren't a lot of opportunities for people of color to get a good foothold into that field either if they're interested in learning."

When Ashley was talking about her role in the meat system which gets animal protein from farm to plate, she explained "we're all white at the deli and it's definitely interesting to think about where we are on the chain of distribution and what implications that has that we're the people that people see that are giving, that are providing food when there's obviously so much more work that goes into it." Her deli gets some of their meat from larger slaughterhouses, but customers in the shop aren't engaging with the people who work in that slaughterhouse.

There are many challenges to building cross-community solidarity. What can each group offer the other? And how do you navigate the many identities within the groups of women butchers and women meatpackers, since neither is a homogeneous community? As Anna explained, "women in the meat industry really range from super girly-girl to not at all. We're just as diverse as people are. We're a diverse, diverse group of people who also happen to have one of the same interests. Not even all the same interests." Yet in the face of these challenges, there is potential for building community and solidarity, and creating more just food systems. Increasing visibility of women butchers should go hand in hand with increasing visibility of women in meatpacking. Both groups stand to gain from a recognition of their labor, increased wages to match their male counterparts, and environments where they feel safe and supported with the work they do.

#### • Spaces of Solidarity •

Though there are barriers to cross-community solidarity in the meat processing system, almost everyone stands to gain from such networks. Women in both meatpacking and butchery

are united by the gender-bias in their industries. Solidarity between different groups of women can create big change for *all* employees, as was seen in a movement led by Black women meatpackers in the 1940s-1960s. The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) was the largest meatpackers union in the country at the time. “In a time usually regarded as a lost point in the feminist movement, the UPWA’s African-American and white women demanded equal pay for equal work, access to ‘men’s’ jobs, and greater participation in Union affairs” (Fehn 1998:46). All of the workers in meatpacking faced hazards and low pay, but women specifically, and Black women even more so, faced unique challenges both with management and within the Union.

Racial segregation was the norm in the packinghouse, and white women were given more desirable positions than their Black coworkers, usually in the more hygienic environments where visitors would walk by, “encouraging white women’s identification with cleaner packinghouse jobs” (Fehn 1998:47). For example, Black women would have to clean hog casings, removing feces from the intestines, whereas white women were the face of women in the company to the outside world. This echoes Ashely’s comments about white people being the face behind the counter where customers get their meat, despite the many people involved in the process to get it to the deli. In addition to subpar working conditions, Black women were subject to harassment from coworkers and management. Brie Banks, a Black woman who stood up to the foreman when he would not allow her a break, faced verbal abuse. The foreman said to her that he “would like to get rid of all the n\*\*\*\*\* bitches in the places,” using both race and gender-based derogatory language (Fehn 1998:48).

However, Banks was supported by the Union, reinstated to her position, and Black women throughout the plants came together to boost organizing. It was not always successful, as

when white women in an Omaha sausage plant left their jobs in protest of a Black woman joining the team. However, the Black women of the UPWA “comprehended the shared interests of a diverse workforce and how management impeded or undermined workforce solidarity,” (Fehn 1998:61) transcending barriers in order to guarantee a better work environment for all. These women saw the ways in which their safety and their liberation was tied to the liberation of their coworkers. The work of these UPWA activists increased wages, boosted women’s involvement in the union, and established more unity among the workers.

“Race-ethnicity, gender, and class are interconnected, indetermining, historical processes, rather than separate systems” (Amott and Matthaei 1996:13). The meat system brings together in stark ways these many identities and systems, and coordinated efforts must occur to visualize these connections and work towards more justice overall. The UPWA activism, led by Black women, offers an example of cross-community organizing, and the benefits it can bring to *all* employees. Sharing knowledge and stories can bring together women and workers from all parts of food systems.

## Conclusion

### Future Directions

“It is an unforgettable, irreversible, and definitive fact of feminist experience that respect for women’s experience/voice/perception/knowledge, our own and others’, is the ground and foundation of our emancipation—of both the necessity and the possibility of rewriting, recreating, the world” (Garry and Pearsall 1996:37). This thesis was a platform on which to create “that respect for women’s experience/voice/perception/knowledge,” and the sentiments expressed by these women in meat processing are translatable to a number of other industries where women fight to have their knowledge recognized.

In the era of #metoo and #timesup, it is essential to identify the many ways women are impeded in their work and lives because of structures of gender hierarchy and the maintenance of male dominance. The pyramid of oppression (Figure A) shows how smaller acts of exclusion and bias, such as sexist comments and employment discrimination uphold a system of oppression, including the more extreme forms of violence at the top. Women in meatpacking and butchery encounter both the small and the large as a part of their work, as do women in so many industries. The impediments to knowledge, as described in chapter two, are one form of a smaller bias which uphold the circumstances higher up in the pyramid.

Lily spoke about this issue, explaining “I also have a lot of female friends who work in other food and farm related fields that all sort of share similar experiences. I mean, this whole hashtag me too movement and the sexual assault community kind of, to an extent, resonates in this food and farming world. I mean, there’s prejudice in every field, and it exists here too.” There have been a number of high profile sexual assault cases in the restaurant industry, which is so connected to the butchers and meatpackers. Cross community solidarity, as analyzed in

chapter three, offers potential for creating large and small scale change to improve work environments and learning spaces.

What could this change look like? Women in meat processing are already envisioning and creating these new spaces. Ashley's experience of challenging identity-based bias through her work shows what can be when customers and coworkers welcome and embrace someone's skill, regardless of their identities. Ashley developed intimate relationships with the community connected to her deli, and was able to bring her whole self into her work. "I think one of the coolest parts of doing this kind of work is it's just so connective. I've met so many people and I'm part of their lives in this super, super intimate way that I literally know what they're eating for dinner. That's really, that's kind of like a personal thing and I know their preferences. People walk in the door and I'm ready to cut up their steaks however they want." Even if Ashley moves on from her place of work, the next time someone who is a woman and/or queer joins the team, she will have helped break down barriers for that person to succeed in their field.

A big part of this change starts with visibility, like what Ashley provided. Erika Nakamura, a popular butcher in the meat processing world, spoke in an interview with *Serious Eats* about the shifting demographic of meat processing, explaining "I think it's certainly changing. Whether it's me and Jocelyn, or, there are some other super-noteworthy female butchers, like Kari Underly...There's more and more women out there. We love to try to be activists to an extent, too. There are support systems for ladies in this environment" (Spaeth 2017). Women butchers are gaining more popularity on social media, and boosting visibility for their role in the profession. Cara Nicoletti was referenced by a number of the women I spoke to, and she has 18.4k followers on Instagram. Nicoletti was among those Lisa cited when she explained "I think I've always been looking to women who butcher."

Change can also be in the form of equal access to job opportunities, so that Christine doesn't have to go by Chris in order to get a job suitable for her experience. It can be intentional creation of spaces for women of color or other folks marginalized in the butcher community, so that they have access to a foothold in an industry which is hard to break into. Lily's recommendation at the end of chapter one was for organizations with many resources to support meat processors who are marginalized in the industry. It can be a celebration and visibility of the *many* people involved in getting meat from farm to plate, so that consumers know all who are involved in that process.

For Lisa, change around gender bias in the workplace is also in the hands of men in the industry, not just a burden for the women to bear. "You have to have a network of people who will recognize and stand up against that [gender bias], or just a network of men that know when to step back a little bit." Part of standing up against that bias is reframing how women are portrayed when their skills are discussed. Cudworth's example of the man who said his successful female trainee was "not much like a man at all" is reflective of the way many women in meat and food industries are portrayed. Jocelyn Guest, a coworker of Nakamura at White Gold Butchers in NYC, explained "women these days are pretty ballsy, too. They're just like, "Whatever. I'm going to try to do it. But people do still say stuff like...I read an article the other day about [celebrated Bay Area chef] Dominique Crenn, and someone, I don't know who wrote it, said, 'Oh yeah. She's so awesome. She cooks like a man.' That's like at the Olympics, when someone was like, 'Oh, she's a female Michael Phelps.' It's like, she's just a fuckin' thug, and she's good at what she does" (Spaeth 2017).

Women butchers are pushing for more recognition and visibility of their contributions to the field of meat processing. For some, though, the long term goal is to have 'butcher' be a truly



gender neutral term, which applies to them as well as their male counterparts. Jessica Wragg expressed this sentiment in her VICE interview; “it would be lovely to just be a butcher, not a “female butcher” (Wragg 2017). Sam hopes people “move away from the novelty aspect of a woman behind the counter of a butcher shop. I am proud of the representation I can offer, I am so excited to change the perspective of what tradespeople look like, but I think the ultimate goal is for that novelty to wear off.” I started this paper by asking you, the reader, to imagine a butcher. Do it again, and open yourself to the many identities your vision may hold.

## Appendix A: Methodology

My focus for this thesis was on women who work professionally as butchers in the United States. I had two interviewees who currently use both they/them and she/her pronouns, and were comfortable with me using either. As many of the experiences spoken about occurred when they primarily used she/her, I used these pronouns throughout. More research exploring how nonbinary gender operates in the workplaces is essential, but is not the focus of this project.

Although there are women who participate regularly in some component of the acts of slaughter and butchery around the world, they primarily work in a non professional role. This absence of women in professional butchery spaces indicates the structural forces keeping women out of this professionalization. The prevention of professionalization is a mechanism used to marginalize women in many industries, including those connected to the food system. Women who work professionally as butchers are outside the domestic meat preparation which is more palatable to the general public, so I wanted to give this professionalization my focus.

I conducted seven interviews, some of the results of which appear in this paper. Other butchers expressed interest and excitement about participating in this conversation, but those interviews did not come to fruition. My research population was found in two primary ways. Half came from connections I had through my work as a farm educator, or people I knew through friends, etc. who were in the meat processing field. The other half came to me as a result of my post on the websites of The Butcher's Guild<sup>5</sup> and Grrls Meat Camp. This data comes from a small group of self-selecting individuals, so is not representative of all women's experience in

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<sup>5</sup> The Butcher's Guild self-describes as "a fraternity of meat professionals bound by The Oath to sell good meat" (Butcher's Guild—About). It was founded by a woman, Tia Harrison, who is the current president. The guild connects butchers, primarily in the US, to one another, and offers various educational programming, online and at conferences.

meat industries. Additionally, I only interviewed women, and so did not offer a space for men to share their thoughts directly about this topic.

Interview was the best form of data collection for my topic, a topic I could not simply observe, related to history and emotional responses to lived experience. As Merriam explains, “interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (1998:72). All interviewees were informed of the nature of the project, and given the opportunity to request anonymity. Interviews were conducted 1) in person 2) on the phone 3) via email, depending on location and the interviewees preference. They ranged in time from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes.

All verbal interviews were recorded and transcribed, with permission, so as to ensure accuracy of content. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format; I had some questions to guide the conversation, but would follow where it flowed. “This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam 1998:74). However, I found that many interviewees, despite my clear stating that the conversation could go any direction, felt more comfortable answering a set group of questions. Still, the questions led to a variety of different answers, and conversation did flow out from some responses. Not all interviewees received the same questions, or the same order of topics of inquiry, based on when in the process they were interviewed, and how our conversation naturally moved. The following is the most recent version of questions given in an interview, though some were framed slightly differently in the actual conversation, depending on what language seemed most clear.

1. Tell me about yourself, your story (i.e. where are you from/live, what do you do, what's your mini autobiography). Feel free to mention anything you find important, whether or not directly related to butchery.
2. How did you come into working with meat?
3. What are the challenges you face in your work? What are you most proud of?
4. How does your gender identity influence the way you approach your work/career? How does it influence the way others see you and work with you?
5. Are there other parts of you/your story which influence the way you approach your work (race, class, sexuality, role in families, etc)?
6. What do your family and friends think of your work?
7. Anything else you want to tell me? Things you wish people knew about women who butcher?

Conversation did move beyond these starting points, which led to a range of data. All interviewees were given the option to stop the interview at any time, and were allowed to refuse to answer any questions. This thesis is being sent to those who requested to read it upon completion.

I used an open coding method to review my interview transcriptions, which allowed me to see what themes and concepts arose, rather than reading for a set response. My primary codes were related to knowledge, education, gender identity, food systems, and finances. "The ethnographer is indeed interested in categories, but less as a way to sort data than as a way to name, distinguish, and identify the conceptual import and significance of particular observations" (Emerson et al 2011:151). My argument was driven by the themes that presented themselves within the coded data.

## Appendix B: Figures

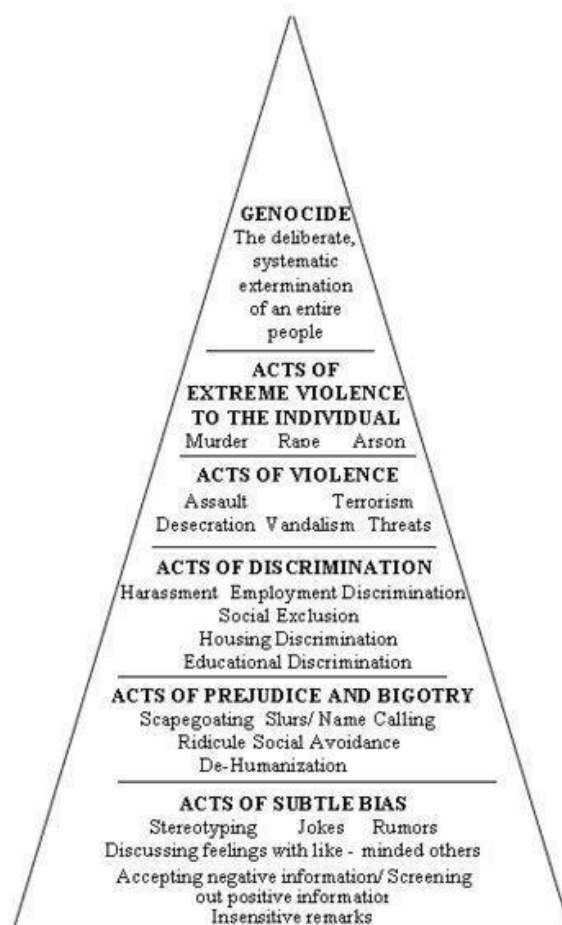


Figure 1. Pyramid of Oppression

### Appendix C: Photos of Participants

Not all participants were able or willing to submit photos, but those that were are shown here.

Photo 1. Anna



. Anna



Photo 2. Sam



Photo 3. Lily breaking down a deer carcass for a hunter friend





Photo 4. Lily teaching a hands on nose-to-tail workshop



Photo 5. Sam and a coworker

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